

King John Signs the Magna Carta

By Sharon Fabian

When King John didn't treat his people right, Robin Hood took care of the problem in his own way. He stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Of course, Robin Hood was a fictional character.

King John, however, was real. And many real people had problems with the way King John was ruling.

King John had been fighting battles in France for many years, trying to regain land that England had once ruled. The battles were going badly; England was losing. English soldiers were dying, and the war was getting expensive.

King John's vassals, the barons of England, began to rebel. Under feudal law, it had been their duty to provide fighting men and money in times of war, but they decided that this war had gone on too long. King John had asked for too much.

A group of barons banded together to oppose the king. They refused to pay any more taxes. They formed their own army. They defied the power of the king, and they even occupied the city of London.

King John still had some loyal supporters on his side. He brought in fighters from other lands to supplement his own troops.

A third group of barons did not join either side. They remained neutral.

The church in England had at first supported King John but eventually they took a more middle ground too. By 1215, the conflict had become so severe that there was fear of an all-out civil war in England.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, set up a meeting to discuss a peaceful settlement. He arranged a meeting with all three groups in a meadow known as Runnymede, along the Thames River just outside of London.

At the meeting, the rebel barons presented a document, the "Articles of the Barons," for the king to sign. The king had few options left, and so, he placed his royal seal upon the document.

The document, which later became known as the Magna Carta, had 63 articles. Even though many of the articles are no longer relevant today, and even though the Magna Carta applied to only the 25% of English people who were considered free men, it established principles that have become foundations of modern democratic governments. Most importantly, it stated that even the king must obey the law. This was a brand new idea in 1215.

The Magna Carta limited the amount of taxes that a king could collect without the consent of his vassals. In the American Revolution, this principle resurfaced in the protest, "No taxation without representation."

The Magna Carta also said that the king could not imprison free men without it being judged lawful by their peers. In the same way, he could not just take away their possessions or their rights. At that time, England did not have a jury system like we have today, but the Magna Carta established the principle that would later be interpreted to mean that a person is entitled to a fair trial.

Although the Magna Carta was originally just a document to settle a dispute between King John and his barons, it has lived on to become something much greater. The Magna Carta was the original writing that paved the way for some of the greatest legal documents in history. In the United States, its influence can be seen in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

The Magna Carta said that people must be treated fairly by their leaders. If Robin Hood had been at Runnymede, he might have said that it was just what England needed.



Name _____



Date _____

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Questions

- _____ 1. Robin Hood wrote the Magna Carta.
A. false
B. true
- _____ 2. King John signed the Magna Carta as part of a peace settlement.
A. false
B. true
- _____ 3. King John collected lots of taxes to finance his wars.
A. false
B. true
- _____ 4. _____ met at Runnymede for the peace conference which produced the Magna Carta.
A. King John and his supporters
B. A group of rebel barons
C. A group of neutral barons
D. all of the above
- _____ 5. King John was disliked because he _____.
A. collected high taxes
B. waged many battles
C. lost many battles
D. all of the above
- _____ 6. The Magna Carta said that _____.
A. even the king must obey laws
B. all Englishmen should have a say in their government
C. English citizens were entitled to a trial by jury
D. all of the above
- _____ 7. Which happened first?
A. The Magna Carta was signed.
B. King John began a war with France.
C. The American Revolution was fought.
D. The US Bill of Rights was written.
- _____ 8. The Magna Carta is a _____.
A. historical essay
B. written document
C. part of the Constitution
D. part of the Robin Hood legend

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